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# World image of U.S. at lowest ebb

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*Experts blame Vietnam, crime, violence  
for failure of costly overseas promotions*

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"Press releases for the literate in India are something to sell for \$2.00 a hundred pounds — the value of the paper they're printed on. Press releases for the illiterate are something to wrap fish in."

This was the blunt observation of one of the speakers at a special conference held in New York 10 days ago on America's performance record in selling its own image abroad. And it seemed to summarize a prevailing opinion among those present that current marketing techniques need help.

One hundred communicators, professors and public relations personnel emphasized that the government gets minimal return for the \$250 million spent annually on overseas information programs such as the United States Information Agency and its subsidiary Voice of America.

There was general agreement that too often the U.S. neither says the right thing nor uses the right media methods to promote its foreign policies abroad. Undue reliance on old-fashioned instruments like the official press release is just a small part of the picture.

The conference, first of its kind, featured people like George Gallup Jr., the public opinion analyst, and Barry Zorthian, formerly the chief press officer of the U.S. Mission in Saigon, comparing notes on the importance of public diplomacy.

In a keynote speech, the single politician present, Cong. Dante B. Fascell (D-Fla.) stated the commonly agreed-upon premise: "Today the success or failure of foreign policy undertakings is frequently affected more profoundly by what people say and think than by the workings of traditional diplomacy."

The main moving force behind the meeting was Edward L. Bernays, the Cambridge man who has been called the father of public relations. He criticized our current overseas public relations as woefully unimaginative, and sees the country's image in the eyes of the world becoming ever more stilted and stereotyped as a result.

He wants an easing of the absolute restrictions on USIA programming or expenditures in this country. Though recognizing that without this restriction the agency might originally have become a mere domestic mouthpiece for an incumbent administration, Bernays feels that the rules should now be bent to allow the American public to see what the country is saying about itself abroad. He thinks

this would cause an outcry for needed change and modernization.

Just a year ago, a House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee chaired by Cong. Fassel concluded that the U.S. image abroad was at its lowest ebb in the last 50 years. Four reasons were given for this: Vietnam, crime and violence in the cities, the assassinations of the Kennedy brothers, and Martin Luther King, and "distortions in the minds of foreigners resulting from the imbalanced coverage of U.S. news by their own mass media."

One man at the New York conference at least didn't think the USIA—no matter how revitalized and transformed—could realistically do much about this.

"The simple truth is that the United States of America is what it is," declared Benjamin H. Oehlert, a former U.S. ambassador to Pakistan, in raising the old thesis that the best propaganda can never make up for bad policies or bad news.

From his experience Oehlert said, most foreigners seem to have almost the same suspicions about the USIA that they have about the CIA. This, combined with his view of the dominant impact of private American media on foreign attitudes about the U.S. led him to propose that the USIA be abolished.

Other speakers urged major changes to upgrade the agency rather than do away with it. Several stressed the need for government policy-makers to consult with USIA officials as equals instead of as mere technicians. The negative impact abroad of a domestic speech by President Lyndon Johnson to the effect that the U.S. is stronger than all the rest of the world put together was cited as a disastrous example of what can happen otherwise.

Two of the guests invited to the conference which focussed largely on the USIA were the agency's director Frank Shakespeare and deputy director Henry Loomis. Neither attended.

Their absence raises further questions about the public relations instincts and responsiveness of the agency which is assumed to have mastered these traits thoroughly for properly carrying the mores and moods of America across the oceans.